

Ballots and Bullets

Islamists and the Relentless Drive for Power

WILL THE REAL POLITICAL ISLAM STAND UP? IN JULY 1996, the leader of Turkey's Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party, Necmettin Erbakan, emerged as prime minister in a coalition government. Despite Erbakan's past rhetoric, his government seemed to act cautiously, respecting the secular institutions of state, preserving Turkey's NATO membership, and even maintaining relations with Israel. Was this not proof that Islamists could be trusted with power and its prerogatives?

Then in September 1996, the Taliban, another Islamist movement, overran the Afghan capital

area stretching from the African shores of the Atlantic to the Asian islands of the Pacific. Muslims share a faith and its myths, but their histories diverge dramatically. Islamists, like their co-religionists, are made by these histories even as they make them.

Consider, for example, Turkey and Afghanistan, the settings of Islamism's latest gains. Turkey is the front door of Islam, a country surrounded by seas and straits, open to Europe. Afghanistan is Islam's back door, a landlocked country of narrow mountain passes, remote even from its neighbors. The impact of the West—of modernity and secularism—has been very different in each country: profound in Turkey, superficial in Afghanistan. So it should come as no surprise that Turkey's Islamists feel at home in jacket and tie, and are masters of parliamentary jousting. Afghanistan's Islamists are bearded and turbaned warlords whose claim to legitimacy is the rifle—and whose sole concession to modernity is that the rifle is automatic. Islamists are not above history, and history accounts for an intrinsic diversity in Islamism. In this sea of differences, it would be surprising if Islamist movements shared anything at all.

But they do. In the preoccupation with the unique predicament of each Islamist state and movement, it is easy to lose sight of the essentials of Islamism itself, and to underestimate the challenge every form of Islamism poses to the West.

The Pursuit of Power

Political Islam is the preferred term of the policymakers, but it misses the point. The usual Muslim view has been that Islam does not allow the distinction between the temporal and the sacred, between religion and the state, that has been the defining feature of the secular West since the Enlightenment. In a profound sense, Islam has always been political,

BY MARTIN KRAMER

*Martin Kramer
is Director of
the Moshe
Dayan Center
for Middle
Eastern and
African Studies
at Tel Aviv
University.*

of Kabul. In a spasm of moral rectitude, the Taliban banned women from the workplace and insisted that they veil themselves in public. The zealots ordered men to grow beards and burned Western films outside theaters. Was this not the genuine face of Islamism, pockmarked by intolerance for other Muslims and hatred of Western ways?

These two very different images of political Islam once again produced confusion in the West, and the sense that no meaningful generalizations could be made about Islamist movements at all. Experts, whose stock-in-trade is drawing distinctions, once again hammered away at the theme of "diversity": these movements arise in different circumstances; they are driven by different forces; each is an island unto itself. Social scientists tweaked their intricate systems of categorization to accommodate the latest variations in Ankara and Kabul. And policymakers were not far behind, formulating more litmus tests that would distinguish Islamist "moderates" from Islamist "extremists."

At some level, of course, they are right: Islamist movements are not all alike. Islam is a world religion. One billion believers inhabit an

and it is invoked and manipulated for political purposes by nearly all regimes and their opponents. In Egypt both Anwar Sadat and those who assassinated him in 1981 used Islam politically, to very different ends; so too do the Saudi monarchy and its opposition today. Political Islam, then, may well be a tautology; at best, it is a banal description of the way Islam is believed and practiced by the great majority of Muslims.

Ideological Islam, now most often called Islamism, is something very different, much narrower in its appeal, and much more focused in its objectives and methods. Islamists turn Islam from a traditional mix of faith and politics into a total ideological system, a modern "ism." The translation of Islam into an ideology began more than a century ago, in the actions and writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din "al-Afghani," a preacher and activist whose teachings had an impact across the Islamic world. In Arab lands, two Egyptians refined these ideas into a program: Hasan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s, and Sayyid Qutb, the Brotherhood's chief ideologue. In the Indian subcontinent, Abu'l 'Ala Mawdudi made a crucial intellectual contribution. And in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini adapted this ideology to Shi'ism and then galvanized a movement that carried Islamism to power for the first time.

In the ideology devised by these thinkers and activists, Islam is much more than the final revelation, come from above to supersede Judaism and Christianity. It is hailed as the final system, come to supersede capitalism and communism as the true key to power in this world. There is nothing abstract about this idea of power. It is worldly, temporal power, of the kind Muslims enjoyed for the first millennium of Islam. Throughout that period, Muslims ruled vast empires, led the world in cultural innovation, and mastered the sciences. Now many Muslims ask why it is that foreigners have come to dominate them, and why the Islamic world is poor and unproductive, left far behind by the West, and, increasingly, by the Far East as well.

The Islamist answer is simple: Muslims have fallen away from the essence of Islam, personified by the example of the Prophet Muhammad and codified in Islamic law, the *shari'a*, a code based on direct revelation from God. Muslims will remain in their wretched state until they purify themselves by reinstituting this law. If Muslims do as the Prophet did—if they are willing to implement the law of Islam without apology and rely on their faith in revelation to defy the great powers of the day—then this world will be theirs.

The first step is repossession of the state. Islamism is not inward asceticism. It does seek to promote inner transformation, but with a political rather than a spiritual purpose: to fortify believers to make the sacrifices demanded by the pursuit of power. Nor is Islamism social service. Of course Islamist movements do seek to build social bases, and some are famous for distributing medicines and schoolbooks. But for Islamists, social transformation is never an end in itself because civil society is weak, and its conquest is no guarantee that Islamists will prevail.

The only locus of real power is the state, buttressed by

the bureaucracy and the army. Only the state has the material means and the coercive force to Islamize itself and society. Islamism, therefore, cannot remain content to function as a social movement. To fulfill its destiny, it must capture the state and rule. From the very beginnings of Islamism, political power has been the obsession of every Islamist thinker, leader, and movement.

By Any Means Necessary

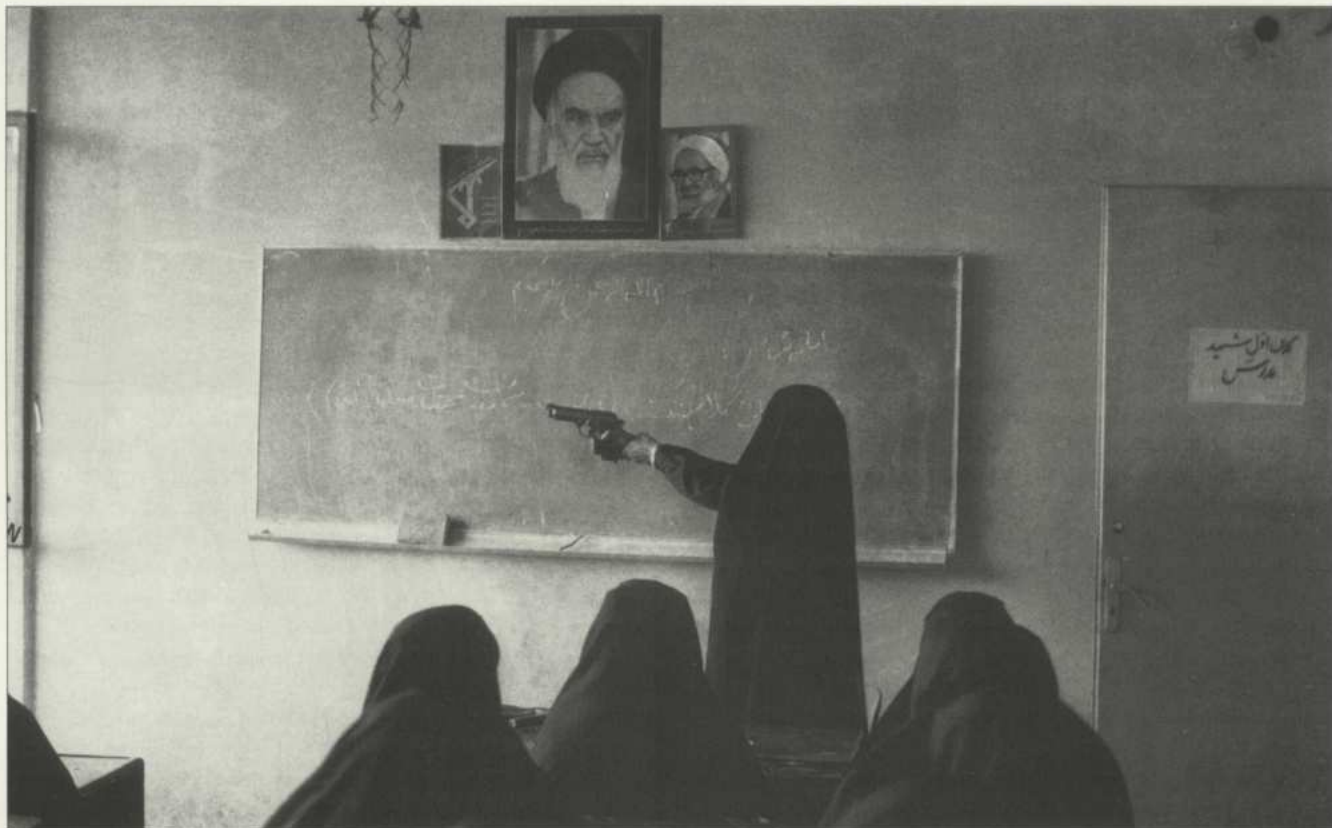
The most pressing question that has faced Islamists has been how to pursue rulership. The rule of thumb here is that Islamist movements usually follow what looks to their leaders like the path of least resistance. They are not committed to any one strategy in the pursuit of their ends, and any means are legitimate as long as they are in accordance with Islamic law, the *shari'a*. This law is not pacifist. It sanctions violence for the legitimate purposes of defending Muslims and establishing the rule of Islam. This explains why Islamist movements have slipped so readily into violence whenever it has seemed like a shortcut to power. In such circumstances, the use of force is not deemed a deviation, but an obligation.

The role of the Islamic state is not to legislate the will of the people, but to implement the will of God.

Islamist movements may choose from a wide variety of approaches in their pursuit of power. In a system that is comparatively open, Islamists may form political parties and compete for voters, as they have in Turkey and Jordan. In a system that is closed but betrays a lack of resolve at its core, Islamists often undertake violent and even revolutionary acts in their attempt to claim power. This was the case in Iran of the Shah; Islamists (erroneously) read this to be the case in Algeria. One particularly striking feature of many Islamist movements has been their simultaneous resort to political and violent means, through the creation of political and military wings—the classic strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Arab world. The mix of means differs widely from setting to setting, but the basic instinct of all Islamist movements is the same: follow the shortest road to power.

Given this indifference to means, Islamists cannot be divided into the fixed categories of "moderate" and "extremist." The movements that have political and military wings—that simultaneously use bullets and ballots—are impossible to classify. Other movements, even when they desist from violence, rarely renounce it, and almost never denounce other Islamists who do use it. For them, violence still remains a legitimate option, whether or not it is exercised.

If the line between "moderate" and "extremist" is drawn not just between means but between ideas, no Is-



Islamic law sanctions the use of force to defend Muslims and to establish the rule of Islam.

lamist movement fits neatly into either category. For example, most Islamists favor economic policies that would be regarded in the West as "moderate," yet they favor social policies, especially with regard to women, that would be regarded as "extremist." Finally, Islamist movements are also constantly moving in response to changing circumstances. A "moderate" Islamist ally can rapidly become an "extreme" Islamist enemy, as did the mujahideen of the Afghan war, who went from Cold War allies of the United States to conspirators intent upon blowing up Manhattan skyscrapers and traffic tunnels. In short, the efforts of social scientists and governments to pigeonhole Islamists have created immense blind spots, concealing the complexities of Islamist choices.

Islamism in Power

The essentials of Islamism come into clearer focus wherever Islamism is in power. Here, too, there is variety, because not all of the Islamists in power exercise power to the same degree. In Turkey, Islamists must share it with secular coalition partners, while a vigilant army watches from the wings. In Sudan, they have far greater scope, but still have a military junta as partners. In Afghanistan, they have not yet consolidated their hold over the country. Only Iran may be described as an Islamist state in the full sense.

Yet there is one common feature of Islamism as it assumes power: an irresistible leaning toward authoritarianism. The explanation, again, lies in Islamist thought: Islamists share the idea that God, not the people, is sovereign, and that obedience to God, not the rights of man,

must be the governing principles of a just state. The role of the Islamic state is not to legislate the will of the people, but to implement the will of God.

Islamist states have created different institutions to achieve this end. In Iran, for example, an elected parliament implements the law, an acknowledgment that there are several different ways to interpret the law, that they are all legitimate, and that only a representative body can choose among them. Nevertheless, parliamentarians must first have a proven commitment to Islam, and so they must be screened prior to candidature. This screening board disqualified 40 percent of the candidates for the 1996 parliamentary elections. Since even this cannot guarantee the right outcome, the choices of the parliament are subordinated yet again to a council of "guardians," whose task is to reject any legislation that stretches Islamic law too far. To prevent the emergence of an organized opposition, political parties are not permitted inside or outside the parliament. In short, the Islamists have allowed some open space for debate—only among themselves.

In Sudan, the process of implementation is much simpler. An assembly, more selected than elected, rubber-stamps the decrees of the military junta, working hand-in-hand with its Islamist mentor, Hasan al-Turabi. Turabi, arguing that Sudan faces a state of emergency, has blocked every avenue of dissent by banning political parties and muzzling the press. Sudan, unlike Iran, was once a democratic polity, and Islamists first organized in an atmosphere of relative political freedom. Having now seized power, they have worked systematically to exclude all others as they impose their program.

Some Western apologists for Islamism—and they are numerous in academe—have argued that the dismal record of Iran and Sudan should not be counted against Islamism itself. They point out that the Islamists came to power in Iran by revolution and in Sudan by coup, and that neither is conducive to the building of pluralistic, democratic institutions. Were an Islamist movement to be carried to power by free elections, they argue, the results would be different.

But power is not always exercised in the way it is acquired. In the middle of this century, free elections brought to power the worst of the totalitarians, who then preyed upon the very democracies that empowered them. Power is exercised in the way it is envisioned, not acquired, and it is a conception of power that explains why both the Iranian and Sudanese Islamists—separated by language, sect, and historical experience—have produced regimes from the same mold. Their concept of power, developed in the shared corpus of Islamist thought, does not admit that power can be shared, any more than religious truth can be shared. The truth is indivisible; so, too, must be the rule of truth. For anyone who has read the Islamist theoreticians, it cannot come as a surprise that Islamism in actual power has always been authoritarian. So long as Islamism rests on the idea of divine sovereignty, it cannot be otherwise.

Islamists and the West

One highly developed aspect of Islamist thought is an antagonism toward the West. Islamism makes its promises of Muslim power in a world dominated by the modern West. The power Islamists seek cannot be acquired without diminishing the power of the West, and when the West does not cede it, Islamists do not shy from confrontation.

This is a “clash of civilizations” many in the West understandably wish to avoid, but this wish often leads to an underestimation of the Islamists’ own determination. In a recent article in *Foreign Policy*, an author has written that “outside of the Islamic world, most Islamic fundamentalists have no ambition other than the most anodyne desire for security.” Therefore, “Islamic fundamentalism ought to matter no more to the non-Muslim world than Quebecois nationalism matters to Thailand.” The first statement is blithely innocent of what the Islamists themselves put forward as their ambition. The latter displays a breathtaking ignorance of the history, and memory, of Islam’s relations with the West.

“We might not have the actual power the United States has,” says Ayatollah Fadlallah, the guide of Lebanon’s Hezbollah, “but we had the power previously and we now have the foundations to develop that power in the future.” This is the Islamist ambition: power on a great scale. Islam indeed had such power: during the first millennium of Islam, there was no moment when some part of Europe was not under Muslim rule or threat of conquest. In the eighth century, the forces of Islam crossed the Pyrenees; in the seventeenth, they besieged the gates of Vienna. Today, the tables have been turned, and non-believers exercise many times the power of Muslim be-

lievers. The Islamist ambition is to take that power back.

Power must be reclaimed from non-Muslim minorities within Islamic societies, which still sometimes exercise a disproportionate influence. It must be recovered from the Jews now collected in the state of Israel, where they intimidate Muslims with their military might. And it must be subtracted from the Western powers, led by the United States, which dominate the Islamic world through instruments as diverse as movies, news networks, banks, and cruise missiles.

Not surprisingly, the Islamists’ “most anodyne desire for security” has not ended at Islam’s shores. Over the past ten years, it has inspired the World Trade Center bombing in New York, several attempts to lay siege to Paris by bombing sprees, the death warrant on British author Salman Rushdie, and massive car bombings that leveled entire buildings in Buenos Aires. This is clearly a conflict that Islamists are prepared to carry beyond the terrain of Islam.

The extent of Islamist ambition, to read and hear the Islamists, is far-reaching. “Islam is regenerating, the two superpowers are degenerating,” claims an Egyptian Islamist. “Islam is the power of the future, inheriting the two superpowers in the present.” True, they admit, the West seems omnipotent. But it also trades many of the basic tools of its dominance: tanks, fighter planes, missiles, chemicals, and even bits and pieces of nuclear technology. After all, the United States provided Iran with TOW anti-tank missiles in exchange for hostages; it pro-

***“Islam is the solution,”
runs the Islamist slogan. But
the vast majority of Muslims
have concluded that Islam, as
understood by the Islamists,
is just one more problem. Those
many millions want the simple
power to feed, clothe, house,
and educate—power that is
not beyond their reach.***

vided the Afghan mujahideen with Stingers to fight the Soviets. With rope bought from the West, Muslims might be able to bind Western hands. At some level, then, an Islamist state will demonstrate pragmatism, if only to acquire what it needs to grow strong.

Even so, say Islamists, the West will not allow any single Muslim state to obtain the status of a great power. But with greater economic and military cooperation, several like-minded states could magnify the effect of the power they do have. The pursuit of a pan-Islamic policy

Continued on page 61.

fundamentalist and equate them with retrogressive forces or zealotry. The resulting failure to differentiate between Islamic movements that are moderate—willing to participate within the system and seek change from below—and those that are violent and extremist is misleading and counterproductive. Few equate the actions of Jewish or Christian extremist leaders or groups with Judaism and Christianity as a whole. Nor does the US government condemn the mixing of religion and politics in Israel, Poland, Eastern Europe, or Latin America. A comparable level of discrimination is absent, however, when dealing with Islam.

Many governments identify political Islam, simply equated with Islamic fundamentalism and extremism, as the primary threat to national, regional, and international security. Bombings and assassinations in the Middle East and in Europe and America reinforce this charge. Yet questions remain. To what extent are Islamic movements' actions driven by government's failed policies and repressive actions? And how much of the perceived threat of fundamentalism is a facade for authoritarian military/security governments whose main wish is to perpetuate their own power?

The use of violence is also a particularly difficult issue. Distinguishing between moderates and extremists can be difficult: the line between movements of national liberation and terrorist organizations is often blurred or dependent upon one's political vantage point. American revolutionary heroes were rebels and traitors for the British crown. Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, the Irgun and Stern Gang, Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress, and Yasser Arafat and the PLO were regarded by their opposition as criminals leading terrorist movements. Similar issues exist elsewhere. Is Christian liberation theology and its derivative movements in Latin and Central America simply a crypto-Marxist revolutionary force or an authentic populist movement? Yesterday's terrorists may be just that, or they may become today's statesmen.

The challenge is to move beyond an imagined monolithic political Islam. The diversity reflected in differences between state Islam, as seen in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Iran, Pakistan, or Afghanistan, can also be seen in differences among Islamic movements, from moderate and pragmatist to radical extremists. The Muslim Brotherhoods of Egypt and Jordan, Pakistan's Jama'at-i-Islami, Turkey's Refah Party, Tunisia's al-Nahda, and Algeria's FIS, to name a few, eschewed violence and participated in electoral politics. At the same time, Egypt's Gamaa Islamiyya, Algeria's Armed Islamic Group, and Jihad organizations in many countries have engaged in violence and terrorism. The challenge for students of Muslim politics is to avoid the easier, monolithic approach and instead to evaluate each country and each Islamic movement separately and within its specific context. Just as democratic, Western Christian, European, or Chinese nations, despite common features, show distinct characteristics and national interests, so too a rich diversity of peoples, governments, and interests are found in the Muslim world and within political Islam. •

KRAMER—Continued from page 19.

is obvious in the cases of Iran's deep investment in Hezbollah, and Sudan's offering safe haven for terrorists on the run. But the recent attempt of the Refah Party in Turkey to forge closer ties with Iran and Libya demonstrates that Islamists cannot resist a pan-Islamic option, even when its potential benefits seem miniscule. The idea of a Muslim bloc, farfetched as it may seem to outside observers, is a genuine aspiration of all Islamists. While no Islamist state can afford to make foreign policy solely on this basis, every Islamist state will attempt to Islamize some aspect of foreign policy. A policy that is pragmatic here and pan-Islamic there looks contradictory, but it serves the same purpose: the empowerment of Islam.

The Crucial Variable

Islamists crave power, monopolize it when they can, and will deploy it against the West. Whether or not Islamism succeeds in seizing power depends decisively on the resolve of those who now command the power of the state. Each regime has its own legitimacy and logic. Some have invoked them effectively to "tame" or even break their Islamists; others have not.

When an Islamist movement faces a regime that is indecisive or weak, it usually resorts to radical means in pursuit of its most radical program. It was Anwar Sadat, in a moment of need, who allowed the Islamists to resurface as a political force in the 1970s after the long years of Gamal Abdul Nasser's suppression. In a climate of freedom, they grew ever more extreme, until ultimately they assassinated Sadat himself. The last Shah of Iran practiced a very uneven repression, showing leniency even to his most ardent opponents. Many of the Iranians who made the Islamic revolution had been in the Shah's prisons, only to be released. Iran's Islamists sensed that Shah Reza Pahlavi was a man of weak will, who would not order the army to fire on the crowds. They made a bid for total power, and they won.

One ruler paid with his life, another with his throne, for allowing Islamists the latitude to organize against them. But other rulers learned the lesson, and they have shown that vigilance can thwart Islamist designs. This is a truth Western observers of the Third World often find hard to accept. A noted French journalist and former diplomat offers the usual platitude: "Islamic movements inevitably grow stronger with repression," and "the regimes are helping them by repressing them: being underground heightens their prestige, giving them an aura, a mystique."

Is this anything more than a Third Worldist myth? Iraq's Saddam Hussein, for one, crushed his Islamist opposition, ordering its leaders abducted and killed. Few of them came out of his prisons, and those not imprisoned learned to obey, so that today, there is no discernable Islamist opposition in Iraq. Syria's Hafez Assad faced an uprising of his Islamist opponents and put it down in 1982 by leveling a city; his opposition has scarcely been heard from since. In Algeria, Islamists who rushed to jihad against the regime, thinking it would soon collapse, have fragmented under counter-pressure.

Mubarak and Tunisia's Ben Ali have used firm and even heavy hands against some Islamists, in order to discipline and isolate the others. This has worked: the measures have persuaded Islamists to moderate both the tone and substance of their program, at least for now.

Sometimes the mere threat of repression has a sobering effect. Jordan's Islamists, ever mindful of King Hussein's ruthlessness in facing down a Palestinian challenge in 1970, know never to call the monarchy into question. In return, they are allowed a bit more space than Islamists elsewhere. And in Turkey there is the ever-present army, with a past record of intervention, waiting in the wings should the Islamists go too far—something the Refah Party ignores at its peril. There are no "moderate" Islamists, but most will respond to firm resolve by making the pragmatic calculations necessary to assure their survival.

Is there a line beyond which repression becomes counterproductive and serves to strengthen Islamist movements? The danger is greatest wherever regimes resort to blanket methods, which signal weakness and often miss the target. But there can be no doubt that repression, real or threatened, has so far been the most important deterrent of Islamist violence, and the most persuasive incentive for Islamists to rethink their dogma. Certainly there is nothing admirable in such repression, and in some forms it warrants criticism and even condemnation. But if a "moderate" Islamism has any chance of emerging, it is far more likely to come from Islamists in exile and prison than from Islamists in power.

The Islamic Promise

In the meantime, Islamism in many settings is on the defensive. Last year's gains in Turkey and Afghanistan are far from consolidated. Iran and Sudan are consumed by domestic problems, many of them self-inflicted. In Egypt and Algeria, Islamist violence became so random that it drove masses of people, even those disaffected by their rulers, back into the arms of the state. The prospects of Islamists in both countries look grim, although they are now fixing their hopes for a breakthrough on Saudi Arabia. But evidence for their presence on the ground there is still thin.

Even Islamist movements that claim legitimacy from their struggle with Israel have lost ground. Over the past year, the Lebanese government, along with Syria, trimmed Hezbollah's share in Lebanon's parliament. In the Palestinian areas under Yasser Arafat's control, a calculated policy of intimidation against Hamas has persuaded it to suspend the kind of violence that nearly destroyed the Oslo agreements. The Islamist attempt to rekindle the Arab-Israeli conflict has not succeeded, and has stiffened the resolve of peacemakers, Arab and Israeli.

"Islam is the solution," runs the Islamist slogan. But the vast majority of Muslims have concluded that Islam, as understood by the Islamists, is just one more problem. Those many millions want the simple power to feed, clothe, house, and educate—power that is not beyond their reach. There is an Islamic threat, but there is a greater Islamic promise. The challenge to the West is never to confuse the two. •

EL-HODAIBY—Continued from page 23.

lim Brotherhood's contribution to political life, including its participation in general elections and representative bodies.

The Brotherhood has declared fifteen democratic principles, included in my political program for the November 1995 elections, which we invite all political parties and powers in Egypt to support as a National Charter. These principles declare that "it is not permissible for any one individual, party, group, or institution to claim the right to authority, or to continue in power except with the consent of the people." We upheld the principle "power exchange through free and fair general elections." We confirmed our complete commitment to freedom of religion, opinion, assembly, parliamentary representation and participation (for men and women), an independent judiciary, and an army free from political involvement.

The Rights of Non-Muslims

The texts of the Qur'an and sunna obligate Muslims to ensure the safety and security of non-Muslims with revealed books preceding Islam (particularly Jews and Christians) as citizens in the Muslim state. These texts

It is worthwhile to remind ourselves and others that Islam is the only ideological and political system that has honored man and humanity to the utmost degree.

ensure for non-Muslims the freedom of belief and the freedom to abide by the laws in which they believe, not the Islamic shari'a. For example, non-Muslims marry under their own laws, and their marriages are recognized by the Muslim state. Nor are they bound by the dietary laws of Muslims. The Islamic texts allow Muslims to deal with those non-Muslims as long as the Muslims observe the shari'a in such dealings.

The non-Muslims also have the right to own property, real estate, and all kinds of assets. They can engage in various professions like medicine, engineering, agriculture, and trade. They have the right to assume all offices of state that are not related to enforcing the Islamic shari'a in which they do not believe. In addition, they are free to take their disputes and litigation to competent and knowledgeable persons of their own law. A Muslim judge cannot examine or pass verdicts in these cases unless non-Muslims themselves refer these cases to him.

The stand of the Muslim Brotherhood is based on the clear Qur'anic edict of no compulsion in religion: we do not wish to compel people to act against their faith or ideology. Our stance regarding our Christian compatriots in Egypt and the Arab world is not new and it is clear and well-known. The Christians are our partners in the country; they were our brothers in the long struggle